

HEALTH MATTERS

Understanding the HPV Vaccine

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HPV stands for **Human Papilloma Virus**. It is a very common virus. Most people who have sex will get HPV sometime in their lives. There are more than 100 different types of HPV. Some types can cause **genital warts**, and about 15 types can cause **cervical cancer**. Most people who get HPV do not even know it. In healthy people, most HPV infections go away naturally in less than 2 years.

There is no treatment for an HPV infection. Rarely, HPV (especially types 16 & 18) may not go away. This can cause precancer changes or cancer in the cervix. The **Pap and HPV tests** can find abnormal cells caused by HPV. Usually, these cells can be removed before they become cancer cells.

An **HPV vaccine** is now available that can prevent some of the most common types of HPV. It may **reduce your risk** of all three problems caused by HPV: cervical cancer, precancer, and genital warts.

HPV **spreads** from one person to another by **skin-to-skin contact** in the genital area. HPV can spread through vaginal, anal, and oral sex. Even after you get the HPV vaccine, you can still get other types of HPV and STIs. That's why it's important to...

Practice safe (or safer) sex. That means using condoms with all sexual partners. Condoms won't protect you completely, but they are the best option aside from not having sex at all (abstinence).

Don't smoke. Smoking makes it harder for your body to fight viruses like HPV.

Get screened regularly. Have a Pap test starting 3 years after you first have sexual intercourse or by age 21. After that, have the test every year. You should have an HPV test, too, if your Pap test comes back as "inconclusive" and you are age 20 or older. Women age 30 and older should have Pap and HPV tests every 3 years if both are normal, or more often if the HPV test is positive.

5 Questions to Ask Before You Get the HPV Vaccine

Which type of vaccine should I get?	Currently, there is only one approved type of HPV vaccine in the US. It protects against HPV strains 16 and 18, which have been linked to cervical cancer and precancer. It also protects against HPV types 6 and 11, which cause most cases of genital warts.
Will I need more than one shot?	Yes. You will need three separate shots over a 6-month period.
What should I expect after the vaccine—will there be any side effects?	Medical studies show that the HPV vaccine is very safe. Your skin might be sore, red, or swollen at the site where you get the shot. Some women may get a fever, headache, nausea, or dizziness after getting the shot.
Do I need a Pap test or HPV test before I get the vaccine?	No. But after you get the vaccine, you should begin to get—or continue to have—regular Pap tests. The vaccine doesn't protect against <i>all</i> types of HPV that can cause cervical cancer. Also, some people may not get full protection against the specific types of HPV the vaccine is designed to prevent—for instance, if they've already been exposed to HPV or haven't had all three shots.
How long will the HPV vaccine last?	Currently, it appears that the vaccine protects against HPV for at least 5 years. Studies need to be done to see how long vaccinated people remain immune and whether booster shots are needed.

Frequently Asked Questions about the HPV Vaccine

How Does the HPV Vaccine Work?	The HPV vaccine stimulates your body's immune system. Your body produces antibodies to certain HPV types, the same as if you really had the virus.
Who Should Get the Vaccine?	The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Cancer Society recommend that all girls ages 11 to 12 get the HPV vaccine. Girls and women between the ages of 9 and 26 can get the vaccine too. The vaccine is not approved for women over 26, pregnant women, or boys and men. The vaccine works best in girls who have not yet had sex (who are still virgins) and/or have not been exposed to HPV.
Will the vaccine infect me with HPV?	No, the vaccine doesn't contain the live virus, so you can't get infected.
Why is this vaccine recommended for young girls?	The vaccine works best to prevent cervical cancer, precancer, and genital warts in girls who have not yet had sex or have not been exposed to HPV.
If my daughter gets the vaccine, do I have to explain sex to her?	It is your decision whether to tell your daughter about sex at this time. It is truthful to tell her the vaccine will help prevent cervical cancer when she is a woman. You can also say it is just another vaccine—like the ones she got for the measles and mumps—to help keep her from getting sick later on.
Why aren't boys and men being vaccinated too?	Scientists are studying the benefits of the HPV vaccine for boys and men. Once researchers know whether it is safe and effective for boys and men, they may be able to get the vaccine, too.
How will the vaccine affect my risk of getting sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?	The HPV vaccine will help keep you from getting some types of HPV. It will not protect you from getting other types of HPV or other STIs (for example chlamydia, gonorrhea, or HIV.) Always use condoms, especially if you have new sexual partners or if you or your partner has other sex partners.
Can I get the vaccine if I've had an abnormal Pap test or treatment for cervical cancer?	Yes. You can still get the vaccine, but it may not be as effective. Talk to your health care provider about how much protection the vaccine can provide.
Do I need to get an HPV test before I get the vaccine?	No. The HPV test can only tell you if you currently have an HPV infection. The HPV vaccine does not treat current infections but may prevent some future infections.
Will the vaccine get rid of an existing HPV infection?	No, it will not. The vaccine is for prevention, not treatment. It can help prevent genital warts, precancer, or cervical cancer related to HPV, but it can't treat any of these conditions if you already have them.
If I get the vaccine, can I stop having regular Pap tests?	No. You should continue to have regular Pap tests. The HPV vaccine does not protect you from all HPV types that may cause cervical cancer. The Pap test can find early changes that can be treated, so you won't get cervical cancer. Women age 30 and older should get an HPV test and a Pap test.
Where can I get the vaccine?	You can get the HPV vaccine from your: pediatrician, gynecologist, family doctor, or nurse practitioner.
How is the vaccine given?	The HPV vaccine is given as a series of three separate shots (doses) on the following schedule: 1st shot: You choose the date. 2nd shot: Two months after shot 1. 3rd shot: Four months after shot 2.
How much does the vaccine cost?	Each shot costs about \$120, for a total of around \$360 for the series. Many health insurance companies may pay for the cost of all three shots. Some providers also will charge a fee to administer the shots.